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Smith Hempstone: *Haig, Watergate and NATO*

Sen. William Proxmire is of the view that the appointment of Gen. Alexander Haig to be NATO commander effective Dec. 15 will "send a clear signal throughout the military officer corps that politics pays off — and in a big way."

That there is a linkage between political connections and professional advancement in the military will come as news to almost no one except the Wisconsin Democrat.

NOR DID THIS happen this week for the first time, as the good senator might recollect any time he drives around this city's Ward Circle. Artemas Ward's appointment as deputy commander under George Washington was occasioned as much by his political clout in Massachusetts as by his martial prowess.

Nor is the 49-year-old Haig the only military man who found friends in high places to be, shall we say, no disadvantage in Nixon's Washington. Gen. Vernon Walters, the deputy head of CIA, has known Nixon since he accompanied him on his ill-fated Latin American tour back in the Eisenhower days.

Gen. Robert E. Cushman,

Walter's predecessor at CIA and presently commandant of the Marine Corps, was Nixon's naval aide during his vice presidential days.

Which is not to say that Gens. Haig, Walters and Cushman would not have won stars had they not had political connections. Walters is a brilliant linguist, and Haig and Cushman obviously have leadership qualities. But that pipeline to the Oval Office hurt them not one bit.

This is, of course, a two-way street. Presidents understandably like to have in positions of authority officers they know personally, trust and respect. The various services are not averse to having at their heads men who enjoy a certain leverage at the White House.

HAIG, WHO rose from the rank of colonel to four-star general in less than four years, a period of time in which less well-connected officers might receive one promotion, owes his meteoric rise as much to the patronage of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as to that of Nixon.

Haig went to work for Kissinger in 1969 when the latter was running American foreign

policy out of the White House. When he went back to the Army, Haig was jumped by Nixon over 240 more senior generals to become deputy chief of staff. In May of 1973, Nixon brought Haig back to the White House to take over from H. R. Haldeman as White House chief of staff. With Nixon preoccupied with his Watergate problems, Haig became, for all intents and purposes, acting president of the United States.

Because Haig handled the difficult job well and is said to have played a key role in leading Nixon to the conclusion that he had no alternative to resigning, President Ford was reluctant to let Haig just fade away, as so many old generals do, to a six-figure job in industry.

There was some talk that Haig might stay on as Ford's chief of staff. But someone managed to convince the President that Haig was so intimately associated with such minor matters as the Saturday Night Massacre of Messrs. Cox, Richardson and Ruckelshaus that his retention would be a constant reminder of the Watergate unpleasantness.

Gen. Creighton Abrams' death opened up the possibility that Haig might be named Army chief of staff, but opposition to that developed both on the Hill and within the Army. So the idea of sending Haig to NATO to replace the popular and effective Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, 59, was floated.

THE DUTCH objected and there were those rude enough to point out the incongruity of naming a man supreme commander of both NATO and U.S. forces in Europe who had commanded nothing larger than a brigade, and that briefly. But Ford insisted and Haig's appointment was approved Monday by NATO's Defense Planning Committee.

It can be argued, of course, that the NATO job is largely diplomatic in some respects and partially political in others. And anyone who can rise from bird colonel to four-star general in less than four years, be as deeply involved with the Nixon administration as Haig was and still come out smelling even faintly rose-like is both a diplomat and a politician. Artemas Ward would have understood perfectly.